

I Couldn't Stay by ForgottenCheshire

Series: Kinktober 2018 [8]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: M/M

Language: English

Characters: Jonathan Byers, Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-10-08

Updated: 2018-10-08

Packaged: 2022-04-23 02:47:38

Rating: Mature

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,466

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

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Together they head back to Steve's car, the older male holding his hand. Jonathon knows that he shouldn't let Steve do that. Shouldn't let him think that they are that familiar, that close. It's been five years, they're practically strangers. But Steve is warm and he is so very cold.

I Couldn't Stay

Author's Note:

Day 8 Prostitution/Sex Work

The air is cold and nips at Jonathan's nose as he stands out on his corner. Tight pants and see-through shirt leave nothing to the imagination and do nothing against the cold. When he has fled Hawkins after graduating this isn't how he expected his life to go. Selling himself to survive. If his mother could see him now, she'd be so ashamed. But he just couldn't stay in Hawkins.

Too much insanity, too much pain. He would have lost his mind if he stayed. If he stayed where Will was everywhere. If he had to watch Steve come back and... He shivers, ten more minutes and he'll go home if no one shows up. No point in killing himself in the October weather.

"Jonathan?"

His neck cracks, painful and loud to his ears as he turns his head. Steve is looking at him. Steve who he left in Hawkins is here. The car is nice, newer than the one he had when Jonathan left. Steve looks healthy, even if his eyes are wide as they take Jonathan in. The younger boy is only a little jealous over *how* healthy and clean Steve is. And then it really sinks in. That this isn't a daydream where Steve shows up to save him. That he's really there, at Jonathan's corner. He takes a step back, stomach sinking to the bottom of his feet.

"Don't run!"

And maybe Jonathan might have stayed where he was, but Steve opens his door. Jonathan is moving before he can even register it. He doesn't get far, he's still shit at running in the platform heels most of his clients love, when someone grabs his arm. It's Steve, he knows it is.

“Jonathan, please.”

The hold is gentle, he could easily break out of it. Could yank his arm and run like there is a Demogorgon behind him. But there is a pleading note in Steve's voice that reminds him of Will when he wanted something. That little lilt that went away when... Slowly he turns to look at Steve. Once long brown hair is short, jaw still strong. Brown eyes so intense that it makes Jonathon's heart thump. Like he's in love still.

“What do you want?”

It hurts to talk. Rasping and throat begging him to cough.

“To talk. Haven't seen you since Will's-”

“Maybe that's because I didn't want to talk or see you.”

Steve looks at him, looks at him like he actually sees everything that Jonathan is. It makes the younger boy squirm.

“Didn’t? Does that mean that you want to talk to me now?”

Jonathan doesn’t say anything. Just looks at the ground.

“Come have coffee with me,” Steve almost sounds like he’s begging. But Steve would never beg.

“We can talk about anything you want.”

Jonathan quirks a smile, tilting his head so that he can look up at Steve.

“What if I don’t want to talk?” he asks coyly.

“Then-”

Jonathan cuts Steve off by getting into his face, batting his eyes like he would if he was dealing with a John.

“You aren’t stupid, Steve. You know what I am now. Talking is the last thing I want when it costs me money.”

He hates this. Hates lowering his voice to a purr to convince people to fuck him. People who nine times out of ten hurt him. His eyes are half-mast as he stares at Steve. The grip on his arm is almost

nonexistent so he pulls on it. And once he's free he places both of his hands on Steve's shoulders, ignoring the flash of the past it brings, he slides his face closer.

"If you want to spend time with me you have to pay."

"Pay? Yeah, sure. How much?"

Jonathan pauses, eyes blinking rapidly. He hadn't expected Steve to agree to that.

"Fifty bucks an hour and I reserve the right to charge more if you decide that you want to do more than talk."

That should scare Steve off.

"Okay."

"That's what I- wait, what?"

Jonathan stares at Steve. His brain can't seem to compute what Steve has said. The older man is willing to pay *fifty* dollars an hour to talk. To *him*.

"Fine," he huffs out.

Steve's smile is brilliant. God, it still makes Jonathon's knees weak to see. It doesn't matter that years have passed. That they broke up. His heart races just the same.

Together they head back to Steve's car, the older male holding his hand. Jonathan knows that he shouldn't let Steve do that. Shouldn't let him think that they are that familiar, that close. It's been five years, they're practically strangers. But Steve is warm and he is so very cold.

"We miss you."

Jonathan refuses to respond to that.

"Nancy is doing good. As is Dustin. God, you should see him."

Steve chuckles, opening the door for Jonathan. Hesitantly he slips into the car trying not to jump when the door closes. He watches as Steve moves to the driver side. Watches as shoulders bunch up against the freezing air. Admires him. Then the door opens and Steve is talking again.

"Max and Lucas are dating still. Grossly cute."

"How... how is my mom?"

The question slips out without his consent. He doesn't want to know. No matter what Steve says it will hurt. It will destroy him. If she's happy that means she doesn't miss him. If she's sad that means he hurt her and he spent most of his life protecting her. But now it's in the air. Steve pauses, one hand on the still open door. His face twisting.

"She's... she's not doing well. Never really recovered. First Will, then you."

Jonathan eyes the passenger door. He knows that tone. Got it from teachers and his mother, the 'I'm going to lecture you because you did something I don't approve of' tone. He isn't locked in. He doesn't have to listen to this. But he stays. Because he deserves this. Because he was selfish. He hurt his mother.

"She woke up and you were gone. Didn't even leave a note. And since you were an adult she couldn't file you as a missing child, your stuff was packed up so it was clear you left. Neither of us understood why you left two months after the funeral."

"Fuck you."

It's said without heat and Steve shuts his door.

"Sorry," he doesn't sound all that sorry to Jonathan, "didn't mean to upset you."

Bullshit is on the tip of Jonathan's tongue, begging to be said. But he doesn't let it out. Fifty bucks an hour. He's going to be getting fifty bucks for this.

"How does Dennys sound? I can buy you some food."

A stomach rumbles loudly. He hasn't eaten in a while. Can't afford to.

"Fine, but it counts as part of the hour."

The car is started but doesn't move.

"You've changed."

"Being a whore does that to you."

"If you had staye-"

Jonathan forces their lips together. Twisting over the center console and grabbing Steve's still stupidly perfect hair he cuts off the sentence. It's rude. He knows that but he doesn't care. He pulls apart, glaring at Steve.

"I couldn't stay. I just couldn't. If it wasn't seeing Will, hearing him everywhere I went. Walking beside me. Sitting on the couch. If it

wasn't him it was you. It was what we could have been but weren't. It was the fact that a bully was the one you went home to. Not me, not Nancy," he laughs a cold laugh hands still in Steve's hair, "We broke up, stayed friends and I thought I could handle it. That we weren't dating that long so it wouldn't hurt. Thought you would go back to Nancy. Stupid right? Letting it all compound? Selfish that I couldn't handle that alongside Will. When he was standing in front of me I couldn't hear him. His mouth would move. He would smile. Hands gesturing. And when I could hear him I couldn't see him. It would just be him calling out my name. Or asking questions I couldn't answer. I just... I just."

His chest is heaving, stinging tears dripping down his face as he unloads onto Steve. Three months. That's how long it took for Steve to move onto Billy. And maybe he would have been fine if Will... He shudders, gasping, shaking, feeling his heart thunder in his chest.

"He survived Demogorgons and the Mind Flayer. He survived by himself in the Upside Down place. Dangerous things. Impossible things. Things that I was there for, that I helped him through. I wasn't there, Steve. I wasn't there and sometimes I thought he was punishing me for it. Reminding me that I wasn't."

Steve grabs his face, thumbs stroking damp cheeks.

"It's not your fault and he wouldn't punish you. There was nothing you could have done."

The words are meant to comfort. Said in a way that the person speaking them has had them said to them. Watery but honest.

"I couldn't stay. I had to get away," Jonathan repeats softly pulling away. He stays because he needs the money. He stays because the car is warm. He stays because it's nice to not have to fuck to get money. He doesn't stay because he feels lighter now that he's confessed.

"Okay."

The loud rumbling of his stomach doesn't lighten the mood. This isn't a tv show. There is no laughing audience. It's just him and Steve. Steve who smiles so sadly at him.

"Let's get you fed."

They don't talk during the drive. Only the ambient noises of the radio and Jonathan's stomach fill the car. If he closes his eyes Jonathan can pretend that they are back in Hawkins. That the back seat is filled with excited kids. He can pretend that he's happy again. But dreams don't last.

He's used to the looks that he gets stepping into Dennys that they roll off his back. The thinly disguised distaste that barely holds a candle to his own self-loathing. The waitress almost didn't seat them. Wouldn't have if Steve wasn't Steve. They get a booth in the very back, the coffee when it comes is warm. Jonathan cuddles it to his chest, soaking up as much of the heat as he can.

"Cold weather out there," Steve goes stirring sugar into his coffee.

Jonathan snorts.

“Very.”

“Think we’ll get snow? Oh, order whatever you want.”

Jonathan eyes the menu. Part of him wants to order the most expensive thing on there but he, when the waitress comes back, settles for a plate of waffles.

“I wasn’t expecting you to talk about the weather.”

Steve shrugs his shoulders.

“Seemed like the safest option.”

They lapse into silence again.

“Tell me more about the kids? Are you and Billy still dating?” he asks. He’s being paid to talk after all.

“Mike and Jane are still dating. They-”

And so it goes. Steve talks for what feels like hours. Face going through emotion after emotion. Hands sometimes gesturing. The kids are nineteen now and going through so much. Adults. Something Will will never be.

“I think Mike is considering asking Jane to marry him. I told him that he doesn’t need to make such a big decision yet. He doesn’t have to be like his parents.”

The laugh that breaks out of Jonathan is carefree.

“You’re talking about the kid who never stopped looking for her after the first adventure. He’s so beyond smitten.”

“True.”

They eat in between bouts of conversation. Coffee being drained and dirty looks gained for the amount of time they spend there.

“I was a cop for a bit... Well, I was training to be a cop with Hopper. Billy thought it was hot until he didn’t,” Steve admits, face down staring into the coffee like it holds all the answers.

“We broke up last year. I... I was tired, you know?”

A shoulder shrugs half-heartedly.

“I never expected him to change into a completely different person. Didn’t want him to. I just... I just thought he’d mellow out with age. Mature.”

“I’m sorry.”

They pause. Because in a way they’ve reached an impasse. Old wounds that neither feel like poking at tonight. Steve looks up.

“I see him too. Will. I think that’s why I couldn’t stick with being a cop. I had to leave too. And I ended up getting lucky.”

A mirthless laugh.

“Won a good amount from a scratch card. Moved away.”

“If you left-”

“I visit often. I let people know I was leaving. I left a way for them to contact me. I didn’t just *vanish* .”

Jonathan flinches, hands almost sliding away when Steve grabs them. They stare each other down.

"In a way... Deep down... I understand *why* you left. The guilt it eats at you. Tears you down. I was there Jonathan. I was *there*. So it's not the why so much as the *how* that kept me up at night. A how that lead to a why. You left without warning, why would you do that to your mother? To Nancy? To me and the kids? It was never really *why* did you leave but *why* did you leave like that."

The waitress interrupts their moment with a delicate cough, leaving the bill on the table.

"For the longest time, I thought you hated me. Hated me because I couldn't save Will. I was there. I was the oldest one. I should have done something. Anything. I thought that you thought it was my fault... I hated myself too. So I couldn't blame you for hating me... Guess we handled the guilt differently."

Steve stands, grabbing the bill.

"Your mom misses you. Get a call every Sunday asking if I've seen you. The kids miss you too."

Jonathan waits until Steve is almost to the register before standing. He won't admit that his legs feel weak, and not from sitting too long only standing to go into the restroom. He isn't crying. He isn't missing home.

"Could... could we do this next week?" Steve asks once they are back in his car. He asks it in a way that suggests that he doesn't expect an answer. And Jonathan doesn't give him one. Not until a wad of money is pressed into his hands and they are back at his corner.

“Yes,” he whispers softly, leaning in to gently kiss Steve. He’s selfish like that.

“We can do this again next week.”

The air is still cold as he makes his way back to the shitty hotel that he calls home. He laughs, almost manically when instead of the two hundred dollars he’s expecting there’s three. Steve will go broke if he isn’t careful.

Author's Note:

This story is part of the [LLF Comment Project](#), which was created to improve communication between readers and authors. This author invites and appreciates feedback, including:

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- Long comments
- Questions
- Constructive criticism
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